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The Tribes of Northern and Central Kordofan

H.A MacMichael (1882–1969) was a member of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan government between 1905 and 1933 and was the deputy Inspector of Kordofan province in Sudan between 1906 and 1912. After combining his administrative duties with ethnographic research, he published this volume as part of the Cambridge Archaeological and Ethnographic Series in 1912; it was the first major ethnographic work on the Sudan. The book combines the history of the province with genealogical information based on interviews MacMichael conducted with local people during his long tenure in Kordofan. The ethnography's focus on local history and the history of different ethnic groups in Kordofan remains the primary source for the local history of the province and the genealogies of the indigenous population. This volume contains opinions on ethnicity which were acceptable at the time it was first published.

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108010771

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1912
This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-01077-1 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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BY

H. A. MACMICHAEL

SUDAN CIVIL SERVICE

LATE SCHOLAR OF MAGDALENE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge :
at the University Press

1912

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01077-1 - The Tribes of Northern and Central Kordofan
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
London: FETTER LANE, E.C.
C. F. CLAY, MANAGER



Edinburgh: 100, PRINCES STREET
Berlin: A. ASHER AND CO.
Leipzig: F. A. BROCKHAUS
New York: G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
Bombay and Calcutta: MACMILLAN AND CO., LTD.

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PREFACE

THIS book makes no pretence of giving a complete account of Kordofán, nor can the materials from which it has been composed be said to shew the solidarity which is an essential qualification of a scientifically historical work.

My aim has been to describe, however imperfect may be the result, the antecedents of the tribes at present inhabiting the province in so far as any information upon the subject can be gleaned from extraneous sources or from current native tradition.

At the same time, while as a general rule planning to omit minute descriptions of people and places, and avoiding discussion of current questions, whether political or commercial, I have found it advisable to make occasional exceptions where understanding of the conditions of the past and the links connecting it with the present would have been impaired by such unnecessary limitation in the scope of the work. In so far as the work purports to deal with some aspects of ethnology, I must plead in excuse for its manifold shortcomings that I am a mere tyro with no expert knowledge of the science whatever.

One ethnological fact, however, is certain, and as the truth of it applies with varying force to every tribe in the country, it is of primary importance to bear it in mind:—breeding from slave-women captured from the numerous black tribes of the south and west has for centuries affected the racial characteristics and status of the so-called Arabs to a very marked degree. Many of the sedentary population and of the Baḡḡára could almost be called negroid in appearance; but the camel-owning nomads have preserved a greater purity of type.

Southern Kordofán (“Dár el Nūba”), though now reckoned a part of the province for administrative reasons, is to all intents and purposes entirely distinct from it, and to the native is not included in the term Kordofán. My acquaintance with it and its inhabitants, except at second hand, is very slight, and I have only mentioned the Nūba incidentally and in so far as their affairs have influenced the course of events in Kordofán proper.

For similar reasons I have said little of the riverain people now under the White Nile Province.

No separate chapter is devoted to the Danagla, of whom there are numbers settled in Kordofán, though allusions to them are frequent. Their history would more properly be described in a work upon the ancient peoples of the Nile valley; and indeed no inconsiderable amount of information concerning them is easily accessible in the literature of the last hundred years.

Of the present condition of affairs it is sufficient to say that the greatest need of Kordofán is an increased agricultural and industrial population. Its revenue is consistently and considerably in excess of its expenditure, thanks to the wealth, still largely undeveloped, of its extensive gum forests. At present the less productive or more expensive provinces of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan swallow the surplus provided by Kordofán; but when they become self-supporting Kordofán will be able amply to justify a more generous expenditure upon its own necessities of the funds that it supplies.

Though irrigated by no river, its natural resources are not inconsiderable. Cattle and sheep in immense numbers can be reared, and the wells can be greatly increased in number and improved: huge areas can be placed under cultivation by corn, sesame, ground nuts, “senát,” and similar products: the trade in ostrich-feathers, which is already considerable, would offer no mean prospects if adequately organised and controlled under expert management; and the gum forests are capable of almost indefinite development. Hitherto the expense of transport to the river has been a serious drawback but in January 1912 the

railway reached El Obeid, and the effect of the changed conditions is already apparent.

The reader may perhaps complain that undue prominence has been given in this book to native "nisbas" or genealogical tables, for they are admittedly inaccurate, vague, and inconsistent—and, as Escayrac de Lauture remarks, "la généalogie des chefs arabes n'est pas du reste toujours tenue avec cet ordre merveilleux et cette rare exactitude qui caractérisent les généalogies allemandes." On the other hand, great store is set on them by the tribes concerned, and the belief in them, however misplaced, undoubtedly exercises considerable influence in inter-tribal affairs. Moreover, however inaccurate their details, certain glimmerings of truth appear here and there and cannot be neglected by one trying to find some dim light in the general darkness.

One point may be noticed in this connection: the Kabábish, Dár Hámíd, Ḥamar, and several other tribes of Northern and Central Kordofán, claim ultimate descent from a certain 'Abdulla el Guhani of the tribe of Guhayna. No particulars of his life or times are forthcoming, and in fact the "fekis" ignorant of the Ḳaḥṭánite origin of the tribe of Guhayna universally attribute to it a descent from 'Adnán the Ismá'ílitic ancestor of the Prophet. It is in one respect particularly curious that the Ḳaḥṭánite origin of Guhayna has thus come to be considered of insufficient nobility, and a connection with the Prophet invented to enhance it; for, on similar grounds, but on precisely contrary lines, Arab historians, realizing the superior purity of the Ḳaḥṭánite blood, and unwilling to admit any inferiority in the ancestry of Muḥammad, credited Ismá'íl with a fictitious wife of noble Ḳaḥṭánite blood, and ignored the Jewish version, followed in other respects, that Ismá'íl took a wife from the land of Egypt.

A word is perhaps necessary as to the scheme of transliteration adopted. I have endeavoured to pursue a uniform and coherent system, but no doubt inaccuracies will be found, more especially in the spelling of the names of tribal subsections, which seldom appear in writing, and which when written are as often mis-spelt as not. In such cases one has to trust mainly to

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the ear and to the probable derivation of the word. In the case of certain stereotyped words such as "Omdurman" (Um Durmán), "El Obeid" (El Obayyid), "El Gleit" (El Kilyat), and "Khartoum" (Khartūm) I have left the more usual spelling unchanged in order to avoid an appearance of undue pedantry.

It only remains for me to express my great indebtedness to the books of the present Sirdar and Governor-General of the Sudan, Lieut.-General Sir F. R. Wingate, and the Inspector-General, Major-General Sir Rudolf Baron von Slatin, for information regarding the period of the Dervish revolt. So vague, disconnected, and often contradictory, are native accounts that the two historical works mentioned were of inestimable value to me. My thanks are also due to Professor William Ridgeway, Dr A. C. Haddon, and Dr C. G. Seligmann for their invaluable advice and help; to Mr S. A. Tippetts for information kindly given me by him about the Habbánía, and certain sections of the Gawáma'a; to Captain W. Lloyd of the Scottish Rifles, late Governor of Kordofán, for various notes upon the tribes of Western Kordofán; to Mr H. R. Palmer, Commissioner for Revenue, Northern Nigeria, for several valuable notes on the tribes of the Western Sudan; to Dr F. A. Bather of the British Museum and Mr G. W. Grabham of the Education Department of the Sudan Government for kindly assisting me in the identification of the objects found in the Northern Hills and at Faragáb and depicted in the two plates; and to Captain H. R. Headlam for permission to use photographs taken by him of the "názirs" of the Kabábísh and the Kawáhla.

H. A. M.

September, 1912.

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*This map is available as a download from www.cambridge.org/9781108010771

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